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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 007313

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KPAL](#) [PREL](#) [KWBG](#) [PBTS](#) [IS](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: THE BULGE: JORDANIANS SET TO BEGIN WORK ON SOUTHERN WALL

REF: JERUSALEM 3629

Classified By: AMBASSADOR EDWARD W. GNEHM FOR REASON 1.5 (B)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Raif Nijem, Vice-President of the GOJ's Restoration Committee for Al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock and the leader of a Jordanian team sent to study the bulge in the southern wall of Haram al-Sharif (see Ref), is optimistic that work can begin the week of December 22 to shore up the southern wall of the Haram al-Sharif. The real issue, according to Nijem, is not the bulge, but a number of cavities in the wall that were detected after five core samples were taken during the committee's October trip to Jerusalem. Nijem also expressed frustration with the Israeli insistence on bypassing the Jerusalem-based Awqaf employees for a Jordanian-based team to conduct the samples and restoration. End Summary.

WALL WILL BE FIXED, POLITICS ASIDE

2. (C) On December 12, Poloff visited Raif Nijem at his Amman office and queried him on the results of his study of the southern wall of Haram al-Sharif. Nijem said his team had conducted five successful core samples that were roughly 2.4 meters long with a six inch diameter. Nijem was less worried about the estimated 36cm bulge in the wall than the large cavities between the inner wall and outer skin where the binding materials used--mostly lime, coal, and quartz--had been leached out by water erosion over the centuries. Of the five core samples taken, three had cavities, the largest one being 30 cm deep.

3. (C) Nijem anticipates that work on the wall will begin as early as the week of December 22 with the initial stage of injecting a new binding material between the inner and outer walls. That work, he said, will be done by the Swiss firm Hilti and will take only about a week to finish. After the binding material has stabilized the wall, the plan is to repair the individual stones of a section of the southern wall that would likely take 1-2 months. Nijem told Poloff that the Israeli side had agreed to the restoration plan and the use of Hilti to complete the first part of the restoration.

4. (C) While Nijem complimented the Israelis at the working level--specifically mentioning the cooperation of Col. Nisso Shacha and Yoran Oahyon--he urged Poloff to intercede with the Israelis on behalf of the Jerusalem-based Awqaf team, whom the Israelis would not allow to work on the survey. Nijem was concerned that the Israelis would not allow the team to work on the restoration of the wall, which will require painstaking stone by stone repairs. He argued the Jerusalem team had many years of work experience on the Haram al-Sharif and was best suited and situated for the work.

5. (C) Nijem was also frustrated by the politicization of the issue, criticizing mostly the Israeli press for blowing the issue of the bulge out of proportion. "One article claimed the bulge was one meter and blamed the Awqaf for it" according to Nijem. As reftel noted, Nijem told Poloff about the Israeli attempts to monitor work on the wall via a video camera mounted about 100 meters away. Nijem also dismissed Palestinian claims that Israeli excavations conducted in 1968 had caused the bulge. However, he did point out that the excavations had exposed more of the wall to weather and will necessitate more restoration work in the future.

COMMENT

6. (C) Per reftel, Nijem alluded to no dispute between the PA and the GOJ for control of the Waqf, but reaffirmed that the Hashemites--as descendants of Mohammad--have divine authority, so to speak, over Jerusalem's holy sites. "The Saudis oversee Mecca and Medina, but the Hashemites oversee al-Aqsa." (Note: Article 9, para 2, of the 1994 Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty also specifies that "Israel respects the present special role of the Hashemite Kingdom of

Jordan in the Muslim Holy Shrines in Jerusalem. When negotiating on the permanent status will take place, Israel will give high priority to the Jordanian historic role in the shrines." End Note.) More engineer than politician, Nijem would like to see the Jerusalem-based Waqf more actively involved in the wall's many restoration needs, primarily for technical and logistical reasons, but clearly decisions on the wall and its environs will continue to be made from Amman, not Ramallah.

GNEHM